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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 004314

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SUBJECT: SYRIA'S RIAD SEIF A HALF PRISONER, DAMASCUS
DECLARATION GROUP CONTINUES WORK

REF: DAMASCUS 4000

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: Former Damascus Spring detainee Riad Seif met with A/DCM for 90-minutes August 30 to discuss ongoing events in Syria, including organizing by the Damascus Declaration group. Recently the group issued a statement criticizing the August 15 speech by Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and calling on Syria to stop interfering in internal Lebanese issues, Seif said. The Damascus Declaration group is working on its political program and would like to call for a national conference in six months to discuss publicly the group's ideas in the run-up to Syria's 2007 legislative and presidential elections, Seif said. Since July 14, Syrian security have required him to report daily to Internal Security, said Seif, noting, however, that he continues to meet openly with foreign diplomats. End Summary.

12. (C) CURRENT CLIMATE IN SYRIA: Former Damascus Spring detainee and former Damascus MP Riad Seif met with A/DCM for 90-minutes on August 30 to discuss ongoing events in Syria. In the aftermath of the Israel-Hizballah conflict and Asad's August 15 speech (reftel), the international community understands more clearly how much the regime wants to intervene for its own advantage in Lebanon, according to Seif. This undermines the regime in the eyes of the international community and strengthens the position of Syria's internal opposition, Seif said. The Damascus Declaration group issued a statement August 30, criticizing Asad's speech and calling on Syria and other Arab regimes to stop interfering in Lebanon's internal issues, said Seif, who described the lengthy process of getting consensus for the statement from all of the factions involved in the Damascus Declaration group. (Comment: Seif did not elaborate on how the statement was circulated but hinted it was done by Internet, which means only a very small percentage of Syrians would have seen it. We have not yet heard any discussion of such a statement by any of our other contacts.)

13. (C) DAMASCUS DECLARATION ORGANIZING: The Damascus Declaration group continues to organize in Syria, albeit with caution, given that group members are watched and all phones are monitored, said Seif, noting with pride that diverse Syrian factions are working together politically for the first time in 30 years. The group, which issued the Damascus Declaration in October 2005, held a meeting two months ago attended by 32 leaders from different interest groups and developed an organizational chart that includes 22 representatives, Seif said. Subsequently, the 22 representative met and elected Seif the group's president, Seif said. The group is working out its program and would

like to call for a national conference in six months to discuss publicly the group's ideas in the run-up to Syria's 2007 legislative and presidential elections, said Seif without elaborating.

¶4. (C) Such a conference, emphasizing liberal ideas, would be important because at present Islamists have more opportunity to make themselves heard in Syria than do liberal thinkers, who only have occasional opportunities via the Internet, Seif said. A liberal dialogue with the population started during the civil society Damascus Spring movement in late 2000 and early 2001, but the regime saw it was too dangerous and arrested the leaders, Seif said. If free elections were to be held in Syria, "some sheikhs" would likely come to power, but the subsequent election cycle would result in wins by more secular liberals, Seif speculated.

¶5. (C) BUILDING TIES WITH THE U.S.: It is in Syria's interest to build "normal, good relations with the U.S." said Seif. "That's what the Israelis do, but we do the opposite." When asked whether a USG statement on behalf of detained political prisoners would help now, Seif made clear that he did not believe such a statement would have a positive effect, asserting that the U.S. "has no carrots" now that the SARG has stopped hoping for improved relations with the U.S. Political prisoners such as Kamal Labwani, Syrian intellectual Michel Kilo, and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni are building political capital by spending time in prison, Seif said. They will not suffer unduly as long as they know that their families are cared for, said Seif, noting that he belonged to a Damascus Declaration committee that was providing stipends of up to USD 120 per month to prisoners' families. (Seif did not indicate where his group was getting the funding for this activity.)

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¶6. (C) SARG TACTICS: As of July 14, Syrian security have required him to report daily to Fouad Nassif Kheirbek's Internal Security headquarters, said Seif, noting that often all that is required is that he "show up and read a book or sleep" until the "old general" named Turki Alamadin handling his case releases him. Seif added that he made a point of going every morning to his appointment, with the exception of August 29 when he traveled to Lattakia to pay his condolences to the family of Michel Kilo, whose mother passed away. "I'm dealing with them (SARG officials) very carefully," said Seif, explaining that he listened to but flatly refused SARG demands that he withdraw from the Damascus Declaration group and refrain from meetings with foreign diplomats. "My strategy is to force the regime to choose between two bad choices -- either arrest me, giving me more publicity, or allow me to continue political organizing," Seif said.

¶7. (C) Seif said he had regular meetings with diplomats and had been scheduled to hold an afternoon meeting with Germany's deputy FM in early August, but that security services had learned of the meeting and kept him at their offices for hours. Seif said he had also been scheduled to meet with the German FM, before the official canceled his August 15 trip to Damascus because of Asad's strident speech of the same day. (Note: Seif's new wife, Pelican Mourad, works at the German Goethe Institute in Damascus.)

¶8. (C) Comment: Seif seemed to be in good spirits (and health), despite the intense harassment the security services have subjected him to over the past few months, including implicit threats to his daughter. He seemed buoyed by his election to head the Damascus Declaration Group steering commission and the recent issuance of the group's statement critical of the SARG for its handling of Lebanon. Despite Seif's claims of relative freedom to organize, we have received the impression from other contacts recently that the intense SARG surveillance and harassment were severely limiting Seif's movements and ability to organize and engage in political activities. Seif remains the most charismatic,

pragmatic and least parochial of all the internal opposition figures we have met. He is at present walking a fine line, striving mentally to stay active and keep the internal opposition at least on life support, but avoiding provocations that would result in his re-arrest or bring harm to his family.

CORBIN